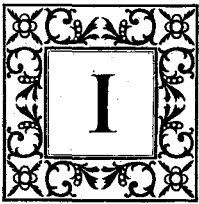


# The Book of the Debts

BY DONALD CORLEY

ILLUSTRATION BY MEAD SCHAEFFER



I was Sally Eastmooring who gave me the first news.

I had met her on Fifth Avenue one afternoon.

"I have something very strange to tell you," she said immediately. "It's about Richard—he's come back!"

"Richard Castigan?"

"Evidently, since he is giving a dinner a week from to-night."

"But—?" I began.

"Yes, that's what I said," Sally interrupted, "but—Richard is dead! Here, read it for yourself."

MR. RICHARD CASTIGAN  
INVITES YOU  
TO CELEBRATE THE  
PAYMENT OF HIS DEBTS  
AT A DINNER  
HOTEL GONCOURT  
TUESDAY EVENING  
SEVEN-THIRTY  
MARCH 26, 19—

Thus read the card that she took out of her bag.

"Wouldn't you suppose that he'd know that if he owed anybody anything, they'd be only too glad to forgive it him,

just to have him back?" said Sally, when I looked up.

"Well, I always said he *wasn't* dead," protested Marjorie Tierce, at a tea on the following Sunday. "Even when those two men described his death in New Orleans. Yes. Well, I thought that 'that woman' had simply driven him away."

"Wonder why she persecuted him so?" ruminated Bertha Stack.

"Anybody whom Richard loved could persecute him," said Sally. "It's because he is too sensitive, too much of a perfectionist. Too little of a conformist—too forgiving and too gentle—and devoid of the spirit of retaliation that protects most people. He never fought about his point of view."

"From the little that Richard ever said about her," offered Marjorie, "well . . . she broke his jade cups, destroyed his papers, and . . ."

"I should say she had done worse than that," said Sally. "I always suspected her of killing his self-respect by belittling his work. She made his gifts—since he couldn't make money by them—seem negligible to him. And Richard was *really* an architect, you know. Then, there was in him a queer despair. He was always running away from it. I think that his novel that he never finished, his

sonnets, his 'little ships,' were all simply desperate recourses, to escape himself. He tried to create beauty out of despair . . . perhaps that is not the way to do it, altogether. And three years ago, when he disappeared, I guess he had come to feel terribly ashamed about his debts . . . and he couldn't get any work to do. He said to me, then, whimsically: 'Well—I guess I'm "on the town," Salicia!'"

"And yet, he was always ready with the marvellous smile that he had. *That* endeared him to people, don't you think?—that and his unworldliness, and his quick recovery from misadventures—given ever so slight an encouragement," suggested Lucian Valiant.

"He always seemed to me," said Bertha, who had known Richard most of his life, "like a lost page out of a symphony score—all the parts there, but, without the rest—just a haunting motif."

"But why couldn't he just come back, without thinking of his debts—who cares?" Sally returned to her affectionate grievance.

"Well, I think he means other debts besides money. He said to me once: 'I owe people interest on their expectations, Virginia. They've "made me up," out of the promises I gave them; now, I've got to be the man they've made up, you see? I owe them a lot!'" The girl who spoke had been Richard's *confidante*, more than any one else.

"Anyway," said Bertha, as we went down the stairs, "whatever *dénouement* Richard has up his sleeve will be a good one! Trust his dramatic sense. He could always make a better *amende honorable* than any one else, and"—she added lightly—"he broke a good many engagements when he disappeared—including one to dine with me!"

We were shown into a private dining-room of the Hotel Goncourt on Tuesday evening. A long table fashioned like a gondola, with fourteen gilded chairs along its sides, a toothed silver prow with a small lantern facing the door, and a silken marquee at the opposite end, over a tall carved chair that we all knew as Richard's, awaited us.

The deck of the gondola, covered with golden brocade, held a yellow plaster

model of a city, with three public squares, and cloisters about them. From the centre of the city sprang a delicate tower, with small bells hung in its topmost arches. Three fragile fountains stood in the public squares, and minute jets of water tinkled elfinly as they fell upon rings of glass bells.

Between the city walls and the dinner-plates of black porcelain were formal gardens, with paths, labyrinthine hedges, green olives in tubs representing clipped shrubs, and jewelled fruit-trees with cherries on them, by way of apples.

We found our places by the cards that informed each one who his neighbors were, with a whimsical summary of their foibles and interests.

Mine read: "At your right hand is Miss Elizabeth Erring, the archæologist who discovered the newest Sapphic fragments. She is versed in Chinese poetry, and has translated many Egyptian inscriptions. *A gauche*: Lucy Galleon, a youthful spinster—of fairy-tales—who really likes cats, and believes in Leprecauns."

And Sally flung her card over the city to me.

"Lucian Valiant was a man  
Who found his stature far too small;  
Fine books he wrote, and a moving play—  
(Not moving picture—at least, not yet!)  
And now he's grown seven cubits tall. . . ."

"Giovanni Freevale came through Florence . . . on his way from Greece. . . . He takes us to far centuries, and reincarnates them for us."

Bertha Stack was presented to her neighbor as "An unscrupulous woman who has learned to be kind," and Sally was indicated as "That woman, of whom the gods may have despaired, considering how little they could endow her with, further, when they sent her to represent them in a foreign complexity . . . but they despair not, who have known her diplomatic skill. . . ."

The dinner was launched, with a queer pathos.

The door opened, and a grave and distinguished man entered, with a bow that included every one.

There was something familiar about

the stranger, who went to the head of the table and drew out Richard's own chair, and yet every one seemed puzzled about him. No one could place him.

He looked like a man who had suffered deeply, but there was acceptance in the lines of his face and in his deeply burned eyes.

The silence that fell upon his entrance, punctuated by the tinkle of the fountains and the stealthy whisper of strings that came from beyond some curtains at the end of the room, was profound and expectant.

We waited.

The strange man contemplated us all in turn, then he lifted his glass.

"I welcome you all in the name of Mr. Richard Castigan," he said quietly.

It was a silent toast.

The woman at his left, who murmured, "And where is Dick?" was answered by a look so full of reluctance, so evasive, and yet a trifle quizzical, that we were made to feel that it was not yet time for Richard to appear.

"How haunting that man is!" said Miss Erring in a low tone. "He is like a man whom one has known in several books—like Balzac's Rubempre—or more like the man who appears in so many of Meredith's novels under different names, and yet curiously alike. . . . Fevrel . . . Evan Harrington . . . Beauchamp . . . all romantic, sensitive, different extensions of the author's character, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes," I assented, "and he's like a man whom one has seen a dozen times at the same table in a restaurant, or passed in the street every day—and never realized how well one knew him until now."

The dinner proceeded through exquisitely chosen dishes. Wines were poured into the rows of glasses . . . wines that brought back forgotten rituals, forgotten felicities of appropriateness.

But it was a sombre feast.

Only, as it went on, every one spoke openly of Richard. The strange man laid no constraint upon us.

From two people beyond Lucy Galleon I caught: "—I shouldn't wonder if she *did* come—"

"Did you ever see her?"

"Once. . . ."

"I guess she was the real reason that he disappeared."

"Yes . . . she broke him up . . . killed his spirit . . . he loved her, you know . . . and that very openness in him, that scorned to dissemble, put him at her mercy. . . ."

Coffee appeared, in cups of gold lacquer.

The strange man drew from his pocket a slim black book, very much battered. Two waiters brought a quaint little chest of red leather and placed it at his right hand, and a lighted candle on a bronze tray was set before him.

All eyes were fastened on the book, and, after a noticeable pause, he opened it.

"Pursuant to the long-deferred intentions of Mr. Richard Castigan, this, the Book of his Debts, is at last to be read, his obligations cancelled, and the book burned," he read.

"Item: Ten dollars sent anonymously to Richard Castigan, while in distress; the donor never discovered. This debt is now to be paid by the sending of one hundred dollars to a man known to be in straits himself."

And the first leaf was torn out and burned.

"Item," went on the strange man—  
"How like the will of François Villon," murmured Miss Erring.

"—three Jacobean chairs to Sally Eastmooring, in payment for three saving words spoken by her on a black afternoon. As a gift—as lagniape—a pair of silver earrings."

And as Sally opened the box and put the rings in her ears, a tear rolled down her cheek.

"Item," the voice went on, "ninety-six dollars in payment for the dinners so generously shared with Richard Castigan, during three months of a terrible summer, by his friends Lucian and Dorothy Valiant. During this evening four persons are searching in Union Square and Madison Square, Bryant Park, and one at large, for those inevitably hungry people who sit upon benches waiting for whatever may happen, in order that they may be fed. As gifts: a thousand cigarettes and the completed model of a caravel to these two friends.

"Item: To an old Irishwoman, once his neighbor, who gave him a drink out of her only bottle of Scotch, to 'buck him up,' when his heart seemed broken, a month in the country, which she has never seen since she was a child.

"Item: To Virginia DuBois, in payment of a nameless (and perhaps unsuspected) debt, two Hiro-shigis, some time admired by her."

A flat package was brought to Virginia. She did not open it, but she smiled in a queer little way.

Richard's debts were varied, indeed.

They included two dollars and a scarf-pin to a Russian tobacconist on Sixth Avenue; a sum of nine dollars and sixty cents to an Italian grocer who had provided him with food; a string of amber beads to Bertha Stack, for having told him a story to beguile him one day; a sum of money lent to him at the time of his mother's death, when he had had to go away hurriedly.

There were debts of gratitude and of money, and debts of purely metaphysical value—a word spoken, a letter sent on impulse; debts of recognition—this man had believed in him, that woman had saved him from self-accusation.

They were all set down in the black book. They were all paid, the money in kind, sometimes with interest—in each case with a gift of some sort.

"Where did I know Richard?" Miss Erring asked, in response to my query. "Why, first on the Acropolis at Athens, one Easter morning. The lambs were being driven into the city below, to be sold on the hoof. Each one had a bell around its neck, and the trilling of those hundreds of little bells, with the deeper notes coming up from all the churches, on that still morning, created a spell that possessed us both. There was no one else on the Acropolis but the two of us, and we were moved to speak to each other, there in the porch of the caryatides. I think he said: 'Paganism brings sacrifices to Christendom still.'"

We listened as to a play to the queer diary that the "items" represented, out of the life of a sensitive man, who had never forgotten the smallest kindness.

The strange man burned the book, leaf by leaf, until the heap of blackened ashes

on the bronze tray looked like a funeral pyre.

It was, one felt, the funeral of Richard's debts, that had haunted his inner life, where there had been, as we all knew, only the desire to give, and not to get.

"He never kept anything for himself," Lucy was saying, "and that, in human relations, is the unexpected, the inexplicable, to the people who hold the philosophy of this world, which is to *get*, without giving. And I think that Richard always gave, not recklessly, but—well, he opened every door of his house of life, because he could not conceive of a relationship with any reserve in it, and that attitude is apt to be despised."

And Richard's curious little couplet, that was across the frieze of his book-plate (the façade of a Greek temple), rang in my head:

"These be the Castigans, wherever they go  
In their faces forever the Mistral shall blow."

The debt that was inscribed to me was, quaintly, a pipe that he had broken one day, and the new one, a Peterson, had a bit of paper twisted in the bowl. "Your new pipe has been 'cured,' in accordance with the precept of an old fumial priest, by fitting the end of a banana into the bowl, which, after three days, absorbs the oil of the banana, and the sweetness of its pulp, and makes a foundation for a 'cake.'"

One of the last debts was a fragile tomb-bottle, in payment for having been forgiven for a thoughtless action.

"Item: In fulfilment of the promise that some of you felt that he had as an architect," the strange man concluded, as a pale golden liqueur was being poured into the last of the glasses, "the model that is before you is that of a city already begun upon the nucleus of an old Spanish monastery . . . a city to be called Ascalon, in the coffee regions of the state of São Paulo, Southern Brazil. The bells that are to hang in the tower are to be the ships' bells of the first voyagers to Brazil, mingled in a chime with the old monastery bells. The designing of this city was intrusted to Richard Castigan as architect. It was he who made this model."

And as he burned the last leaf of the book, the little fountains on the table ceased to play, and the glass bells about them eddied into silence as the water subsided. The hidden strings beyond the curtains ended their plaint in a sob. And then, in the dead silence, the tiny bells in the tower chimed the hour of eleven.

It was, one felt, time for the *dénouement* of the feast.

The door-knob clicked and through the door came, like an apparition, the figure of a woman.

She stood at the prow of the gondola—at the blade of the feast—staring straight at the strange man, who stared back at her, steadily and impassively.

The woman reached up to the teeth of the silver prow, fingering it aimlessly, as if to see if it were sharp.

"It's the unbidden guest," whispered Miss Erring.

The woman's manner was defiant, nervous, constrained, and unwilling. She seemed to see no one but our host. She seemed like a well-tutored marionette, tall, angular, stiff. Her hair was yellow; her lips thin and straight and colorless.

We all looked at her and waited, in utter silence.

A waiter brought a chair for her—a black chair.

He relieved her of the long black cape that shrouded her, and she sat down awkwardly.

No one rose.

It was as if, in the dramatic moment of a play, some extraneous and unrelated thing had happened—as if a cat had walked on, and the actors did not know quite what to do about it.

The waiter brought a glass to the woman. But when he tilted the dark liqueur bottle over it, the bottle was empty.

It seemed to have contained just enough for fifteen.

The strange man drew from the inside pocket of his coat a square brass box. The waiter carried it on a tray to the woman.

It seemed like a tobacco-box.

We looked on, spellbound.

The guests nearest the woman drew away from her a little.

She took the box, and then she seemed

to realize that we were all looking at her. She seemed to see that we were there for the first time.

Foreboding gathered in her eyes. Her fingers trembled.

Then she pressed the spring and opened the box.

Out of it, after a moment, fluttered a black butterfly. It circled about her head, stupidly, feebly, and then settled upon the woman's bare shoulder.

She tried to brush it away, panic-stricken, with spasmodic and desperate gestures. Then she slipped out of her chair to the floor, without a sound.

Two waiters carried her out of the room, and the door was closed.

The strange man was smiling in a secret and solemn fashion.

No one had moved.

The thing we had witnessed had been so unexpected, so far outside our ken, that we were all transfixed in our places, as a street crowd is for a moment when there is an accident.

The man nearest the empty tobacco-box leaned over and gently closed the lid of it, as one who closed the eyes of the dead.

With the click of the lid the stringed music began again, beyond the curtains, and the three little fountains leaped into life anew.

The strange man tore out what must have been the thin fly-leaf of the Book of the Debts, burned it, and folded his hands after he had closed the book.

The impalpable effigy of blackened paper soared above the table and disappeared.

"Like a black butterfly!" murmured Miss Erring.

"The last debt of Richard Castigan is now paid," said the strange man quietly.

"Why—it's Dick—it's Dick himself!" a woman's voice cried out, hysterical and shrill and glad.

We looked from Virginia DuBois's transfigured face to that of our host, and we saw that it was true, that the thing that had baffled us in him all evening had been erased, and Richard was now revealed, in every lineament, as we had known him. Only, with this revelation came the feel-

ing that he was clear-cut for the first time, that in his face was all the perfection of the things that had been clouded, in other years, by oppression, and misery, and obligation, and self-despisement.

Richard had come through the haze, and his soul was there, for every one to read, and I realized that his face had always been haunted, and that now the haunting was gone; that he was free, of whatever had kept him from being himself, and that now his pride and his humility had been merged into one thing.

I looked about. There was recognition in the faces of his friends.

Lucian Valiant was murmuring huskily, "Well, I'll be damned—" and Virginia, her head on the table, was sobbing quietly.

"This is a man whom we suspected, but never knew before," said Lucy. "This is our friend, whose gesture with a cigarette was a poem, but whose life was like a torn-up street!"

So ended the dinner of the celebration of the payment of Richard's debts.

And two days later Sally told me that he was gone, back to São Paulo, to finish the city of Ascalon.

Virginia, when encountered, had little to say, but smiled serenely

It was more than a year afterward that I was contemplating an ointment-box in the Babylonian section of the British Museum, when an ironic voice near me said lazily: "Curious, isn't it—their very boxes have winged covers. Restless people!"

I turned to find Borla Tourgan, an entomologist whom I had last seen in Rome, four years previous.

"Very curious, the wings on that box," he resumed, when we were ensconced in a bar off Piccadilly, a little later, with two whiskey-and-sodas between us. "Reminds me of something that happened down in Brazil. I was coming through a valley one Sunday . . . I saw a dream city ahead, on a plateau . . . a mirage. When I got to it, I found a chap sitting on a wall whittling a piece of wood. . . . We got into talk about the place, and he began to tell me all about it. . . . He was the architect, it seemed . . . building the town around an old monastery.

"Told me a lot of things . . . lived in New York once . . . ran away. I began to realize that that chap had been life-sick, told me enough to explain that he had had a pretty bad break.

"Said he wanted to go home now, since the town was well under way. Wanted to go home and wind up his affairs . . . had to pay his debts, he said. . . .

"Well, I let him talk . . . seemed to want to get a lot of things off his chest . . . wish I could remember more of what he said . . . anyway, he had a queer idea of debt—felt he owed all his friends something or other. He said they were like the two rows of basalt gods in an Egyptian temple, signifying all the things his life was governed by . . . 'you have to pass them before you go through the narrow door into the sanctuary,' he said. 'And then, you see, I didn't get past them—I didn't go through the narrow door . . . I owed my temple gods too much. Owed 'em for their tolerations, for the immeasurable kindnesses they had performed . . . for their belief in me, and all that. Got too hurt by life to accomplish anything. Got to show them I *can* finish something,' he insisted. 'Had to achieve self-control . . . had to find myself . . . had to begin all over as if I had never been. You see, I had reached the depth of lost identity. I had gotten up one morning, in New York, and looked into a mirror, and couldn't recognize myself. So I knew that I must pay my debts—all of them, before *anybody* could recognize me again. Do you see?' he kept asking.

"That chap interested me enormously," said Tourgan.

"Yes, I do see," I told him, "but how is it, in all this feeling of indebtedness, that you have only gratitude? In the whole category you haven't mentioned any revenge. . . . I find it hard to believe that you have no obligations of that sort . . . we all have them. We may forget about it, but there the feeling is, lingering in one's mind like the smell of peat in an old tweed coat."

"He was silent for a while.

"I used to have an item like that in the Book of my Debts," he said finally. "But I crossed it out. Didn't seem worth



*Drawn by Mead Schaeffer.*

Out of it, after a moment, fluttered a black butterfly.—Page 183.

while. Had it done to me. I know how it feels. Anyway, if retribution *is* due to anybody for anything—they go and find it, don't they? The sceptic falls into the dry well, trying to prove that there are no stars—but looking straight at them to prove it, of course. No, I'm not going back with any debt of vengeance—at least, not consciously.'

"He wanted to give a dinner, and he had gifts for all his friends, things he'd gotten together down there.

"I said to him: 'Look here, I found a cocoon about an hour ago, an unfamiliar one, though I think it may be a Niger Eterniensis Callot. It's a parthenogenetic, anyway, and that's your feeling about retribution, isn't it?' I gave it to him.

"You see," said Tourgan embarrassedly (as if ashamed to have been a bit sentimental), "I felt that that chap's city might become anything—and so might the cocoon. I wasn't sure. And then, I felt that *he* might become anything, so I said, as he put the cocoon in his tobacco-box (it was empty): 'If you get back to New York in a few weeks from now, it will be about time for this cocoon to hatch out, if you carry the box in your pocket. I have a feeling that you may need a little extra gift at your dinner.' We laughed, and he seemed to be pleased to have the thing, and then I said good-by to him.

"Queer chap," Tourgan ruminated when the pretty barmaid had replenished our whiskey-and-sodas. "But I understood him, in a way. He wanted those temple gods of his, back home, to see him incarnated into what they had thought he could be. I always wondered what hap-

pened at that dinner, and what happened to my cocoon.

"I've thought of that chap a lot since. . . . He must have gone back, with all his gifts, and his Book of Debts . . . but I can't help wondering. . . .

"Funny . . . I was reminded of all this by that Babylonian ointment-box with wings on its cover . . . restless people . . . restless chap. I've always wondered if paying his metaphysical debts, and all that, *did* solve things for him.

"That feast of his must have been queer. . . ."

"It was," I said. "I was one of the guests at that dinner."

"So," said Tourgan. "Did he pay all of his debts?"

"Yes, and one that he didn't expect to pay. An uninvited guest came at the end of the feast."

"A woman?"

"Yes."

Tourgan smoked for a while.

"I thought so . . . what happened?" he asked finally.

"A black butterfly came out of your cocoon and flew up to her shoulder——"

"Which shoulder was it?" he asked curiously.

"The left one."

"Why, *that* was the shoulder that was always branded in old times!" exclaimed Tourgan. "What became of her?"

"Oh . . . heart failure, I believe the papers said, next day."

"I see . . . I see . . ." said Tourgan.

"No, it wasn't heart failure, it was self-accusation that killed her—that and hysteria. Queer. . . . Retribution. . . ."

"Very," said I.

